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Cube #347's Excellent Adventure, Part III

*Deja vu: the illusion that one has previously had a given experience
-Webster's New World Dictionary

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In "Cube #347's Excellent Adventure, Part II":

Discovered aboard a Borg cube, the Banshee crew prepared for their demise...but this particular ship was Cube #347. Stuck in the past - before the rise of the Collective - due to the actions of the Federationers, Cube #347 offered a devil's bargain: help us get back to our native time without messing up Borg history, or be assimilated. The Banshee crew contained in Bulk Cargo Hold #3 accepted the former option. A month of boredom passed. Then, as Cube #347 approached the destination of planet #1, a drone designated 187 of 230 (nee Lieutenant Carla Franson, ex-engineering night shift) became obsessed by the fact the sub-collective wasn't as big as it should have been. Now, 187 of 230 and seventeen other ex-Banshee drones have abducted twenty-seven members of the Federation crew and beamed to the surface of an unsuspecting planet #1. And Cube #347 has lost them....

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"...And we sort of lost them." Captain completed his succinct description of the problem, then waited for the response.

Captain Jad Vorezze was silent, as were the others of the command staff. They appeared to be trying to wrap their mind around the pronouncement, but were not coming to grips with the concept. Finally Commander Charlotte Burns, second-in-command of the Banshee crew, asked, "Lost? How can you 'lose' your own drones? It is not like Borg are shuttle keys."

Captain sighed. He took a few moments to listen to internal reports and receive updates from both engineering and sensor hierarchies. "We have not 'lost' them per se; the escapees are still alive. We know approximately where they are, but we cannot pinpoint the location. Once we finish negotiations for spare parts with species #1, we will be sending the Banshee crew to the surface to find the wayward drones. You will go under the pretense...of shore leave. Is that the correct term?"

"Leave?" Vorezze had managed to find his voice. "I don't care anything about leave! I want to know where my crew went!"

Despite the evident downfalls, the rumor of leave was already being whispered within the lower ranks. From the words, it was obvious 'leave' was far from irrelevant, momentarily overriding the horror of losing so many crewmates in the last hour.

"They are not your crew, Vorezze. The probability is high they are now Borg. But they are not /my/ crew either, which is unsatisfactory. The risk of damage to this timeline is high, but I still cannot risk sending down the drones of this cube to rectify the dilemma. Therefore, you will be given the appropriate communication equipment and weaponry to terminate the problem.

One way or another, all will be finished within ten days."

Captain ignored the protests. "You will prepare yourselves. I have other matters to attend to before your assistance will be required." Captain transported away before the expected series of demanding irrelevant questions could begin.

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The new drones could not be fully processed; and the "older" drones themselves were not "finished." 187 of 230 felt vaguely wrong as she surveyed the forty-four others busily moving within the warehouse. Despite the unbalanced mix of drones in bodysuits and those in black Federation Section Thirty-One uniforms, mottled gray skin and extruded implants indicated the nanites were doing their programmed job.

187 of 230 had found herself as the "head" of the group, for all that the term was useless, crafting communally formed directives into specific orders for action. Far above in orbit, she could feel the distant pulse of the Cube #347 sub-collective searching for the forty-five on the planet, but she and the subset of others with hardware-based neural transceivers had narrowed the bandwidth to its absolute minimum to avoid detection. Severing the connection was an option, but the action was tantamount to purposefully depriving oneself of sensory perception; the minds on the cube were comforting, even if they were distastefully inharmonious. Now, other problems demanded immediate attention.

The warehouse, and several nearby, were the solution. Isolated at the edge of a military supply base, the buildings housed all the chemicals, inorganic and organic, and technology needed for survival - once it had been adapted for proper use, that is. The methods would be crude, but the clock was rapidly running out to cobble together the machinery for physical regeneration. After that, the appropriate subspace transceivers could be modified and implanted to replace the limited organic counterparts built by nanites in the new drones. Later....

The pragmatic memories of Carla Franson, night shift engineer of the Banshee, gave the following advice: break-down a problem into manageable parts and take it one step at a time. All the forty-five acknowledged the wisdom. Soon there would be more voices to fill the silence, but until then survival was paramount.

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Jad had just dropped into exhausted sleep when he was roughly shaken awake. He opened one eye to see a blurry form kneeling next to him. The eye closed again and Jad drew his thin blanket (for comfort, not warmth!) back over his head to block out the distant overhead lights.

"Go 'way," he mumbled. "That's an order." Jad settled his face back in the makeshift mess of extra bedding wadded into a vague pillow shape.

"Sir?" The voice belonged to Lieutenant Commander Dan Smith. "I think you better get up. About thirty Borg have just beamed into the cargo hold, and one of them is demanding to talk to the 'one who speaks for all', and it ain't that one who calls himself Captain. Charlotte is trying to BS the drone, but I'm afraid she's just going to get us all assimilated. I've security ready to stun the Commander if it looks like she's going to say something stupid."

The sound of several phasers being fired suddenly echoed off the far ceiling.

"Captain?" called Dan again.

"I donna wanna get up. I'm the captain...I donna hafta get up."

"Jad, if you don't get up, friend or no friend, I'm going to drag you kicking and screaming out to the commons. You can court-marshal me if we ever get back. Get up."

Jad sighed, reaching blindly for his glasses. Once the spectacles were in place, the blur resolved itself into the chief of security. Vorezze sighed again, then sleepily rolled himself to his feet, pausing to straighten his wrinkled shirt. "Maybe Riley and what remains of his engineering crew can coax coffee-flavored mush out of that excuse for a replicator. Or at least something with the equivalent of caffeine in it."

This particular Borg reminded Jad of a very large rodent, much like the dormouse Alice supposedly met when she went to Wonderland in the classic Terran fable. One got the impression that there used to be fur, as the exposed parts, those not hidden by typical Borg hardware, seemed "skinny," in a naked mole-rat sort of way. A pointed snout with twitching nose completed the impression. Jad noticed that both the drone's hands were outwardly unaltered; the same could be seen of the other Borg clustered in a group at the center of the commons.

"You are the one that speaks for all. You are Captain Jad Vorezze." The words were carefully enunciated, although there was an odd feeling that the phrases could degenerate to baby-talk at any time. Buck teeth did indeed reside in the mouth, adding to the rodent impression. "We are of the drone maintenance hierarchy. I am 27 of 27, currently sub-designated Doctor. I am head of this hierarchy."

Jad eyed the thirty drones, then looked back at Doctor. While most of the Banshee crew were keeping their distance from the cluster, a few were edging closer in order to eavesdrop better. One of those was Dr. Liz Lang, hamster Zeke riding her shoulder as it occasionally made chirping comments. "So? What do you want? I thought Captain was our liaison."

"Captain is indeed your liaison, but he and many of his hierarchy are very busy at the moment. We are here to brief you on your task to come, so you better listen like...." Doctor trailed off, head turning slightly as he caught sight of Dr. Lang, or more precisely, her hamster. The drone suddenly continued with a rush of words, "...like good Federation, or you will not get your treat."

Treat? Huh?

"You will line up your crew in groups of fifteen. We are here to install neural transceivers. My hierarchy does not often get the pleasure of working with the unassimilated, but the maintenance bays are more suited to modifying the original hardware than are those of Assimilation's workshops." The Borg paused again, attention flicking to Zeke once more. Hands clenched once, twice, then relaxed. "You will sit, stay, and comply."

Jad hotly replied, "Wait just a minute! We do not want neural transceivers! I think this crew functions quite fine without them, thank you."

"Bad boy, arguing with your doctor. You have no choice in the matter, so take your medicine like a good patient. The neural transceivers will keep you in touch with each of your crew better than your current combadges, and the technology does not exist to jam the frequencies. In addition, we can monitor your position on the planet without having to worry about you accidentally losing the badges." The tone of voice was definitely beginning to sound like a vet soothing an animal.

"No."

The look Jad received was...odd. He could swear he heard "What a naughty boy" under the drone's breath.

"Ouch! That hurts!" Jad quickly stood from the kneeling position he had been forced into, tearing away from the drone that had been holding his head so that the back of his neck was exposed. He could swear the drone was grinning, but a second glance gave doubt to that brief sighting. Vorezze was left to simply glare at the two, rubbing the area of irritation at the point skull and neck met.

Jad shuddered slightly as he sighted Burns acting in a similar manner, for he could see the piece of hardware which had been "installed" clasped to the back of her neck. Like a flat spider, or a squashed tick, the implant was had wormed its "legs" into flesh until it was flush to the skin, gripping tightly to the vertebral column. He hated to think what might be going on underneath where he couldn't see, but the pain which had accompanied the placement gave plenty of nightmares to an overactive imagination.

The back of his neck tingling, Banshee's captain tried to spot the one called Doctor. "Step away from the hamster, drone-boy, or I'll tear off your leg and beat you with it." Dr. Lang's hostile voice floated from somewhere to the right, near the plant. Remembering how the Borg had been distracted by the sight of the animal, and oddly cryptic warnings by Captain to keep an eye on the pets, Jad was developing a feeling of foreboding. One last glance at the not-quite smirking pair of drones, Vorezze walked quickly in the direction of Liz's threat.

Seeing the approach, Doctor backed away from the miniature Altarian palm, at the base of which bristled Zeke. Liz was between the drone and the hamster, stance akimbo, a glare of madness in her eyes. Jad did not give Doctor good odds should he try to press for the animal: some prizes were not worth the risk. As to /why/ a Borg should appear to want a hamster, he thought it not wise to ask.

Jad adjusted his glasses. "Okay, you sadistic rat, you've 'installed' your implant. Now what?"

If Doctor was offended at being called a rat, he did not show it. Insults were obviously irrelevant. Instead he gave one last (longing?) look at Zeke before placing his full attention on Jad. Above, the public announcement system crackled to life with the Collective Voice.

"Banshee crew, you have been outfitted with neural transceivers. They will link you to each other much more efficiently than your communicators. We will activate the transceivers in three minutes. At that time, you will be able to talk to each other simply by thinking the name or group you wish to contact, followed by subvocalizing the message. There will be a period of adjustment, but it is calculated to be short.

"In addition, your command staff will be able to directly contact this sub-collective. If the need is trivial, you will be punished. We will also be able to issue orders as needed to each of you, and we will monitor all your conversations. You will not have access to the dataspace of this sub-collective, so don't even bother to try."

Doctor spoke, "Does that answer your question? Good boy. Our presence will continue until the implants are activated, at which time we will make what adjustments need to be made."

Precisely two minutes, twenty-five seconds later, all members of the Banshee crew fell to their knees as a burning sensation flooded their sensory perceptions, followed by an intense headache. The pain quickly disappeared, but most were slow to regain their feet.

"You want to what?"

"I thought you really just wanted to be friends, and now I learn this?"

"You tapped into the computer set up a sensor feed from my room? And you read my diary?"

"You want a mouthful, well, I'll give you a mouthful, you pervert!"

All the voices were female, and they all came from women in the vicinity of Ben Rachow. Ben slipped under a heap of writhing bodies, all of which were attempting to kick, punch, scratch, or otherwise hurt the helmsman. He could be seen occasionally in the center of the melee, curled up in a ball, eyes tightly shut.

{I have terminated Lieutenant Commander Ben Rachow's transceiver signal. He will obviously detract from efficiency. He is a very naughty boy.} Jad was startled by the voice, so engrossed was he in watching his officer being beaten to a pulp. Vorezze yelled for Dan and the other males of security to break up the scuffle (allowing women with phasers near would not be a good thing, at least not for Ben), then turned to regard Doctor once more as the latter commented, {Does Ben Rachow always have these thoughts about copulation?}

Jad winced. "I, um, try to stay as far from Mr. Rachow's thoughts as possible."

{A wise precaution. He will have to be left on board when the rest of you are sent to the surface. His link will not be reinitiated.}

"Huh? When is this surface excursion supposed to take place, anyway?" Jad suddenly realized Doctor had not spoken aloud, although he himself had responded vocally.

Twitching nose. {You will be told shortly by Captain; he is almost done with his task. Until then, we will monitor your adjustments elsewhere. Be a good Starfleet and practice using the transceivers.}

Before Jad could respond, Doctor and the thirty Borg disappeared in transporter beams. It was only later, after Ben had been somewhat patched up and the women calmed down (or at least not threatening to mangle various parts of anatomy), that it was noticed the parrot was missing.

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Captain, with the substantial backup of the command and control and engineering hierarchies, completed negotiations with the trade representative of species #1. Ikuli, for that was her name, had authorized a shipment of the components Cube #347 required to repair the chromaton propagation and containment system. In return, the cube offered three tons of a refined metalliorganic compound several experimental industries needed, but had been unable to produce in required quantities. In parting, limited shore leave was granted for "crew" to explore the cities of the lesser land mass (Truillan continent).

{Delta,} spoke Captain into the intranets, searching for the signature of the engineering head, {begin replication of the compound.}

{The amount required will seriously deplete selected reserves,} returned Delta. She continued before the obvious could be voiced, {However, no critical systems will be compromised. Resupply is at our convenience.}

{Good.} A subset of the engineering hierarchy was engaged in estimating the time to complete the replication task. The compound would be ready for shipment in two days. All was satisfactory.

Captain turned his mind to other matters, sending his body out of the nodal intersection to his alcove. As he settled himself into the niche and triggered the commands to start the regeneration cycle, Doctor's mental signature requested the opportunity to report on his task.

{Neural transceivers have been altered as per specified and the implants successfully installed on the Banshee crew. There was some resistance to the idea, but it was futile. One human had to be removed from the general link, but the loss of efficiency is negligible.}

Captain cast his mind towards the partition in the communications section of the net which had been set aside for use by the unassimilated in Bulk Cargo Hold #3. Borg could go through the firewall at will (although a top-level compulsion had been placed to keep the unauthorized out), but on the inside, the Federation people were isolated. Several individuals were tentatively trying the new tech, while others were attempting to block unwanted "leaks" of their thoughts. Several hours would be allotted for the Banshee crew to get used to their transceivers; other tasks had to be completed before they would be needed on the surface.

{Dump all data on the transceiver modifications: I/we want a full report.}

Doctor complied.

It was true, the primary object of the neural transceivers was to act as a more efficient communicator and transporter link with Cube #347; information had even been offered that the sub-collective could talk with individuals (and visa-versa) and exchanges would be monitored. However, that was not the whole truth. Soon enough the Banshee people would learn about sending images and data to each other, although without proper processing of nanites and implants the ability would be, at best, rudimentary. And while Captain could not force compliance, as he could with other drones on the cube via command codes and sheer force of will, he could modify behavior if warranted. Microfilaments emanating from transceiver hardware linked to the pain/pleasure centers of the brain, which would be sufficient to train the Starfleet, and make sure they would not try anything sneaky.

The Borg had learned much from the thus-far short resistance period of humanity and its institutions, enough that Captain was not going to underestimate Vorezze and his crew. Even if they were obviously not the "best of the best," neither was the sub-collective of Cube #347.

{Satisfactory. Your hierarchy will continue to monitor the first hours. Make sure they don't poke at the transceivers too much.}

Doctor acknowledged the dismissal, mentally fleeing back through the dataspaces for his own hierarchy. As he left, Captain could feel some hidden facet of information, but as it did not deal with the immediate task at hand, it was not important. Still...Captain quickly checked on the interior of Bulk Cargo Hold #3, noting the hamster was still present.

Concern dismissed, Captain passed on the bulk of responsibility to Second, allowing his mentality to aimlessly drift in the busy nets, surrendering to the regeneration cycle.

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187 of 230 stepped from the alcove as the regeneration cycle completed. The alcove had had a previous life as a telephone booth, but it served its function adequately, as did the other jury-rigged alcoves. As the body was directed to begin soldering and adjustment of stolen computer parts (taken from an auxiliary warehouse), 187 of 230 was swept more fully into the burgeoning group mind.

All drones now had proper hardware-based neural transceivers, but thus far that had been the limit of body modifications. 187 of 230 knew the assimilation and processing technology on Cube #347 was the end result of nearly eight thousand years of refinement and perfection, but it was denied to those on the surface. Other needs took precedence over installing prosthetics; time was of the essence.

Forty-five drones was not much of a base to bring more voices into the empty spaces of the mind, especially when it could distantly be felt the four thousand on Cube #347 were preparing an offensive to halt the activities. No specifics were forthcoming, but busy anticipation

could be sensed. Still, the greatest weapon of all, more powerful than phasers, more destructive than mass drivers, more insidious than a genetically built plague, was at the command of the surface drones - nanites.

Nanites could turn the tide; nanites would bring more voices, more minds, into the silence. All else could wait. Already, 187 of 230 was mentally among those - physically her body continued to refine the regenerative systems - who were moving under cover of darkness towards the command center of the military warehouse outpost.

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Weapons openly sneered at the assembled Banshee crew. Their so-called security forces were no more specialized, mentally or physically, for combat than any other subset of the group. It did not matter: nearly all would be sent to the surface, regardless of deficiencies. Time had been needed to build the appropriate hand weaponry required to deal with the current problem, the product of which was now neatly lined up on the deck plates. Weapons forged through the communication firewall, addressing the predominately human gathering.

{These are your weapons. You will use them to terminate the rogue drones on the surface. Note that if you formulate any thoughts of using them on those of this sub-collective, you will find they will not work.}

The most difficult issue with building the weapons was the reality of a drone's personal shielding. Nanites laminated a biological's internal support structure with a grid of complicated metallic lattices, which were subsequently powered via an implanted source of power. Odds were very good that while the drones on the surface would not have access to technology readily converted into sensory augmentation and prosthetics, a miniature power source would be easily obtainable. That, and the collective adaptive potential of the small group, would render most conventional energy weapons unusable in the face of the Borg's primary personal defense.

Work-arounds existed, but it would be tactically unsound to give such a weapon to Starfleet. Primitive projectile weapons, while usable, typically did not have the ability to stop an oncoming drone efficiently; and it was most difficult to guarantee they would not be used on the sub-collective units.

The solution was simple, once consensus had been reached in the weapon hierarchy. A hand-held energy weapon, similar to a phaser, but designed to work in the high subfractal frequencies. As a fail-safe, the weapons would not fire on drones emanating a specific series of subspace carrier waves; the necessary chip had already been implanted in those on the cube.

{You will each take a weapon. Familiarize yourself with it.}

Jad shook his head. The thing did not look like any weapon he knew. All technology of which he was familiar, from ancient six-shooters to modern phasers, basically had the same form. While the device had a grip, several buttons which probably functioned as trigger and level settings, and, naturally, a deadly business end, it still seemed fundamentally different. Perhaps the notion came because when he handled the weapon, he felt like he was holding a remote control, which the thing superficially resembled.

As he turned the odd phaser over to look at it from all angles, a mass of...something intruded into Vorezze's mind. Jad was momentarily stunned by the wealth of information concerning the use of the weapon; an entire owner's manual was being unloaded into his brain. When the stream of data came to an end, he knew exactly how to use the phaser, even though he

had never seen it until ten minutes prior.

{You now know how to operate your weapon. You will beamed to the surface within the search area in groups of ten; from there you may split up as you decide most appropriate. The area to examine currently covers twenty kilometers in radius. You will use your tricorders to scan for Borg life signs. All Borg on the surface will be eliminated.}

"Captain, what's going on?" asked Ben. He was up and hobbling around, a much more penitent crewman, but the neural transceiver in his neck had been removed after the "incident". From his perspective, the cargo hold was eerily silent as individuals snapped out of a dazed state, blinking as they peered first at the flat phasers then at each other.

"Instructions," said Jad with resignation. "By the sound of them, we are being treated like drones, and rather stupid ones at that. They haven't numbered us, at least."

"I have a question!" called someone in back. In everyone's minds, instructions continued on. {I...I have a question?} interrupted into Weapons' monologue.

{That's a good Federation-girl,} sung out the signature of Doctor.

{Quiet, Doctor. The assignment is mine at the moment. Continue Ensign Billie Growner. The question had better not be irrelevant.}

{Do we have any say who we get sent down with?}

{Your captain will deal with that. I will now finish the instructions.}

"/What/ is going on, sir?" Ben asked again, a note of agitation in his voice. Jad shushed him. Suddenly the world turned green as a transporter beam caught him without warning. When it dissipated, he was in Captain's nodal intersection.

Captain immediately began to speak: "You will remain on board and act as facilitator for your crew. It will be most efficient if you are here with me. As necessary, you will be sent back to Bulk Cargo Hold #3 for nutrients and rest, but otherwise you will be here until the situation is resolved."

Jad recovered from the unexpected transport, then responded verbally as that had been the mode in which he had been addressed. "Do we have any choice in the matter? I mean, there is very little room for discussion of your plan in this whole fiasco."

Captain swiveled his head to directly catch Vorezze with a piercing blue stare, "We can calculate the odds and design a plan much better than you could. And no, there is no choice...has there ever been a choice? We are under quite a bit of stress at the moment."

"As if I'm not?" muttered Jad to himself.

{I heard that.} Captain's voice was no less piercing in the mind than his stare. The drone turned back to the viewscreen. "Make your teams. Discuss for a consensus with your command staff if necessary. If all is not ready in fifteen minutes, we will beam your crew down regardless of preferences."

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Crewmen Smith and Cranitt stopped at a street vendor's cart and pretended to browse the wares. The Llarn went about their normal business, acting as if two alien humans in black Starfleet uniforms were a normal sight. Looking down at the tricorder, as if examining it for a nuance in translation, Smith shook her head. No Borg in the vicinity.

As the duo walked down the wide boulevard, occasionally rubber-necking as an odd sight came into view, they held a discussion which was being repeated in some variation by all the away teams.

"This reminds me a lot of Earth, you know, down in the old sections of Los Angeles or Orlando," said Cranitt.

"No kidding. Looks just like the touristy neighborhoods near where I grew up. And these people! If this street was filled with humans instead of Llarn, you would swear we were back home."

"The Borg claim this is their homeworld, and these people their parent race. Wonder what happened to turn them so...so...Borg? There is no indication these people now would want to go out in a galactic quest of assimilation."

"Races change...but in this case it would have to be a one-eighty flip. Here, let me check the tricorder again."

"A sewer?" complained Ensign Yarn to chief engineer Riley. "Why a sewer? It stinks?"

David suddenly slipped, falling. He stood up, clothes dripping. Fortunately, it seemed the inhabitants of this planet were a big believer in cleanliness, so the fragrance did not cling too strongly. "I don't know. Probably the Borg idea of a joke. Hopefully we won't meet any sewer maintenance."

"I don't see anything on the tricorder. At least nothing that registers as Borg."

A voice suddenly penetrated the pair's minds; it was Vorezze. {Here...I think this will work. I've been given a map of your local area. It includes a fairly rundown military supply base. Could you check it out?} The map poured into their brains. Although incomplete, it was accurate enough to see it would take nearly four miles of slogging through the sewer to reach the target.

Jad complained, "My head aches. I've been doing this for a long time now, nothing is happening on the surface, and I need a break."

Captain snorted. "Try doing it for an assimilated lifetime, with four thousand. You will be allowed six hours for regeneration."

The transporter sent Jad back to the very empty cargo hold. Ben, who had been sitting near the replicator, playing tug-of-war with the small white dog, looked up. "It is damn quiet in here. How long you goin' to be around?"

Shaking his head, Jad replied, "Don't talk to me. I've a headache the size of this cube. I need to sleep, and I need to sleep now."

"Geesh," muttered Ben as the captain stalked directly for the sleeping cubicles. "You'd think he was having it hard. /I'm/ the one baby-sitting the animals and stuck alone in a place large enough to hold a small armada of spaceships with ease. I wish I knew where the bird went."

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There were now more voices in the silence, more helping to dispel the loneliness. While one being was small in comparison to the universe, many together could grow as large as the universe itself. Many could become the universe.

With the knowledge gained through assimilation of the base personnel, scavenging needed supplies became easier; and a wealth of doors opened with the valuable information. Still, it was not enough.

187 of 230 was one drone among the twenty who snuck away from the supply base, heading towards a small suburban community located nearby. An assimilated member of species

#1 drove the large hovercraft; the other nineteen waited patiently in the covered aft section.

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Lieutenant Commander Dan Smith and a pair of the security crew had been most recently dumped in a residential neighborhood. The previous day had been a bust; the four hours allowed to sleep in the cube had not improved Dan's tired state of mind.

"Sir," said Ensign Hendrick as the three walked down the side of the tree-covered (at least they looked something like trees, even if the foliage was purple) avenue.

"What?" asked Dan. The houses were rather heavy on the corner motif, looking like collections of small boxes; black and green appeared to be favorite colors, although a few were painted a tasteful light gray. Several yards held abandoned toys and bike-analogues.

"Sir," repeated Hendrick, "it is awful quiet around here."

"The kids are probably in school and the adults at work." With the silence pointed out, Dan suddenly found it oppressive. He tried to nonchalantly ignore the creepiness.

"Everyone?" pressed Hendrick.

"Yes, everyone."

Crewman Juviar spoke up, "Lieutenant Commander, I am getting a positive reading on the tricorder."

Dan reflexively glanced around the insanely quiet neighborhood. "Where?"

Hendrick yelled, "Coming right at us, sir!"

"How would you know? You don't have the tri..."

A figure clothed in black with gray extremities charged through a manicured row of white-flowered bushes. Movement and visual cues were sufficient to trigger pseudo-instinctive actions. The Borg dropped to the ground, hit by three separate phaser blasts.

Hendrick arrived at the prone form first, carefully toeing it before boldly flipping the body over. His eyes widened. "Hey, I know him! It's Yeoman Mallory, one of the night-shift that was abducted!"

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187 of 230 grieved; all of the drones on the surface grieved. 1 of 22 had been lost, lessening the totality of the voices. His echo lived on, but it was a poor substitute as potential experiences, potential physical usefulness was wasted. Still, the termination had not been fruitless: it was now known with certainty Cube #347 was on the offensive, using the Banshee crew as hounds.

Time was vital! Drones numbers were beginning to build, had now passed the two hundredth mark, but not all were immediately helpful. While the children would be beneficial in several years, there was no time to pick and choose only adults. Still, the small ones with their more dexterous hands could be used to process the newly assimilated, to build additional subdivisions to the crude regeneration system. In the end all had their advantages, and, most importantly, all increased the Whole.

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{We've got to pull back! Drones everywhere! Beam us elsewhere!} The plea for help

echoed in the nets. Jad beseeched Captain to help, but the latter was already moving the endangered crewmen outside the known area of occupation.

Captain heard Vorezze question David Riley and his partner on their position, which was very precarious. Currently both were in the middle of the growing hive, camped atop crates at the highest reaches of a warehouse. The viewscreen showed skimmed sensory images from Riley. {Turn your head left Lieutenant Commander Riley. Stop. Hold it there.}

Examining the screen, Captain frowned. At the middle of the slightly shaking view, a series of transparent pipes stood, glowing green. Many Borg moved about. {You may move as you wish now.} The sight swiftly became more erratic as the Lieutenant Commander peered directly down from his position, eyes flicking over the bodies massed in straight lines, small beings attaching an unseen component to the back of exposed necks.

"What is it?" asked Vorezze, eyes behind glasses dark with lack of sleep.

"A functioning fusion reactor, much more powerful than anything of comparable size otherwise available on the planet. The next step will be to use the resultant energy to jump-start more efficient power sources."

"And below where Dave was just looking?"

"External neural transceiver hardware being installed on newly assimilated drones."

Jad absently reached back to touch the device stuck on the back of his own neck.

"It is not as sophisticated as that aboard this cube, but it functions well enough." Captain tilted his head slightly as preliminary consensus rang in from the partitions tasked to create a new containment and termination plan. "We have altered our strategy." Pause. {All ground teams prepare to be returned to Cube #347. Orbital bombardment to commence in ten minutes.}

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Cube #347 abruptly dropped into a low orbit, ignoring the protests space-traffic controllers. The protests became cries of outrage as the cube began to rain unprovoked torpedo fire onto the surface of the planet.

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It was known the attack would come. Although it was still not possible to gain specific information from the limited subspace link with the Cube #347sub-collective, the logic of the situation demanded orbital bombardment. Torpedoes did destroy the main hive area, but five new concentrations had been rooted over a hundred kilometers distant.

187 of 230 could feel the elation as thousands of drones busily worked. The sadness was great over the loss of the hundreds at the original warehouse, but unlike 1 of 22, the sacrifice was planned. Sometimes it was necessary to allow some to die such that the greater part could live.

Matters of utmost importance still occupied the new sub-collective's survival, but the danger above now proved to be immediate. A subset of minds reached carefully, widening the subspace link.

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Several pieces of data struck Captain at once. First, the bombardment was unsuccessful, as attested to the continued presence of the link with those on the surface. Two, species #1 was

demanding an explanation of the attack, dispatching warships to enforce the request. And third, those on the ground were now attempting to formulate counterattack thrusts to gain entry into the dataspace.

Captain swiftly gave Second the task of dealing with species #1's representative. The warships were firing as Cube #347 rose to a higher orbit, but the damage was minimal as shielding adapted. Weapons began to disable and destroy the attackers, breaking off only when the ships withdrew. As far as the push for the dataspace, it was easily diverted, inexperience obvious in the ground-based minds.

It would take time to create a new consensus on the next series of actions to take.

Jad felt like he had barely slept when he was rudely awakened by the alarm. He sleepily ordered the computer to set the snooze function.

{There is no snooze here. Wake up and eat to finish your inefficient regeneration cycle. More work is needed to be done.}

Jad attempted to roll over and drop back into sleep, but jumped up as a burst of pure pain flooded his senses.

{Move it.}

"All right, all right!" Jad tiredly did as he was told, noticing everyone else in the cargo hold was asleep, even the animals. Probably the plant was getting a good forty winks as well. The transporter obscured the sight as soon as Vorezze finished his last bite of oatmeal-flavored mush.

Over the next several days, a unit of time which had become quite meaningless as it came to mean "not asleep," Jad was increasingly forced to coordinate his crew by himself. Terse instructions from Captain or another drone would intrude into his mind, and he would then carry them out as best he could. The one time he had questioned the severe delegation of responsibility, Captain had responded that "one can choose to serve as a drone or not...either way the job would be the same." Jad had shut up after that episode.

Captain looked distracted at the moment, staring sightlessly at a point approximately a meter behind the bulkhead. Coordination needs from the surface was presently minimal, teams trying to direct native Llarn forces in the methods of dealing with Borg attacks. Somehow the Borg on the ship had managed to convince the government to help; and for some reason, Jad was sure the government had absolutely no idea the beings on the surface and those in the cube were one and the same.

Jad was tempted to try to eavesdrop on what kept Captain busy, mentally, not with the Borg hardware. The latter suddenly shifted, blinking the one whole eye and changing position. Vorezze watched the many-ness drain out of Captain's slightly glazed sight.

"Report."

"Can't you just do that...." Jad trailed off as he /felt/ extreme annoyance, like that for a fly that refuses to leave picnickers in peace, being directed at him. Jad backpedaled before the punishment with his brain's pain center could be sparked. "Well, not good. Energy weapons, other than those made for us, are absolutely useless. Other, more primitive, methods can be used, but the number of drones killed is more than made up by the number of Llarn assimilated."

"Borg ground assaults are very efficient. As is seen, resistance is futile."

"But you said you didn't want it to succeed!"

"True. But...." Any further comment trailed away as Captain locked into a motionless

stance, eye unfocusing.

"Damn," stated Jad. Dragging, he tried to find the signatures of his command staff, sending out an inquiry for the most recent depressing report from the front lines.

The attacks to breach the sub-collective's code firewalls had become more intense as the number of Borg on the surface grew. Experience was still on the side of Cube #347, but difficulties were mounting. Powerful, the drones on the surface appeared to be united as One; those on the cube struggled with insidious quasi-individuality, attempting to submerge into the united defense needed to keep the assaults at bay.

An extremely small minority was questioning why the sub-collective continued to resist the growing One at the surface. The voices were abruptly quieted as Second "reconvinced" the subset of the need to keep the timeline pure. Deep within, Captain himself wondered at the admittedly insane resistance: Borg was Borg, no matter the tau shift. The thoughts were suddenly swept away as another thrust battered against dataspace barriers.

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Tens of millions filled the universe with their minds, but still it was not enough. Billions yet unassimilated resided on the surface, and hundreds of millions more lived throughout the system and on colony worlds. Beyond that, other species inhabited the galaxy, other sentients who must be introduced to the perfection of a single One working in complete harmony.

187 of 230 knew, as all knew, the gateway to space could be found within the cube above. No longer an overt danger, the cube itself and its Starfleet tools were mere annoyances: the One was swiftly growing beyond the bounds of destruction that was not on the scale of planetary ruin. No, Cube #347 was an opportunity, not a source of fear.

Reaching up again, 187 of 230 leading the grasp for the heavens, the One altering its mode of operation. Instead of attack against nearly impenetrable duralloy walls of code, a gentle whisper was sent searching for cracks in the barrier. << Come to Us. Be of Us. Do not resist Us. You are of Us. Be One...be One.... >>

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Weapons was presenting yet another program of containment based on the current projected scenario of takeover of the lesser continental landmass. Although the odds were extremely low, it might be possible to counteract adaptation of native technologies with the superior machinery aboard the cube, halting the contamination. Captain distantly observed the formulation of the latest plan, more concerned with monitoring the multiplying attacks to the sub-collective's solidarity. Increasing resources were required to repulse the assaults and keep the seething mentalities on the surface out of the local dataspaces.

Then it was too late.

* * * * *

Jad was busily listening to reports from the surface teams when he noticed the sudden intensity of quiet. The subspace link continued to relay Charlotte's words, but it somehow seemed irrelevant. Still present were the underlying noises of the functioning cube, but the

sounds of Borg movement had abruptly ceased. Jad turned to see what Captain was doing.

Captain was motionless...eerily motionless. He had frozen, unaltered arm caught mid-gesture as if he were warding off a body blow, supposedly lost instinct re-emerging under extreme stress. Then the stasis was broken; Captain turned.

"Vorezze, you will halt all activities. The situation has changed greatly. We must allow the assimilation of the planet to continue. If you recall your teams, We will permit them to transport back aboard this cube; otherwise their biological distinctiveness will be added to Our own."

The vocalization was stilted, the pluralities absolute. Jad stared, jaw open.

"Tell your teams to leave, now. We cannot guarantee their safety anywhere but aboard this cube." Captain's eye was preoccupied, as if he were watching a distant scene...and the mentalities behind the gaze were more than a few thousand, many more.

Jad interrupted Charlotte, then mentally switched frequencies to include all for a general announcement, {All teams, report to beam out areas. If you cannot make the rendezvous within the next five minutes, then report directly for emergency evacuation. This is not a drill.} Quiet on the other end of the link. Vorezze could only imagine the panicked thoughts running through brains as bodies abruptly aborted their assigned tasks.

"We are bringing up your crew now. They will be returned to Bulk Cargo Hold #3."

Asked Jad: "What happened? Eight days ago you assured me everything was going to be okay...and now you have us running for our lives."

Captain shook his head back and forth, as if trying to rid his ears of a noise that wasn't there. As Jad watched, as he attempted to eavesdrop, Captain became more...individualistic, although in many respects it seemed as if he were simply a dog which had been allowed temporary freedom at the end of a very long leash. The drone stopped his gyrations.

"A critical mass has been achieved. This sub-collective now understands."

"Critical mass of what? And understands what?"

Captain blinked, still somewhat dazed. "All your crew are now on board. They will be safe."

"Critical mass of what?"

"You are a small being. You would not understand."

"Try me."

"True Oneness depends on a critical mass of sentient minds, just as consciousness requires a key number of neurons. At some point the sum is greater than the parts. Where the Greater Consciousness did not exist, now it does. The Borg exist. Assimilation must continue. Borg must begin the quest for Perfection."

Jad sucked in his breath, many things suddenly becoming clear. Stunned disbelief colored his voice, "Don't tell me we are responsible for the Borg."

Captain turned away, regarding his viewscreen. Complex runes Jad had learned to interpret as numbers flashed in the center of the screen, rapidly becoming larger. Replied Captain as the line of silvery numerals gained another order of magnitude, "We have passed the one billionth drone mark." Pause. "And no, we are not responsible for the existence of the Borg, the Federation is...you and your Banshee crew to be exact. Ironic, is it not? If you had not so boldly messed with systems you did not understand, this sub-collective would not have been sent back in time, and a paradox could have been born. But events were set into motion, and the eventual outcome will be the assimilation of your races."

"Hey! We haven't finished our resistance yet. How could you know the future?"

Captain swiveled his head back towards Jad. "You are optimistic in your way, as we are in ours. I think it would be best if you go back to Bulk Cargo Hold #3. Situations are unfolding which demand my attention. The drones of this ship are being ordered by the Queen to begin a program of assimilation of the orbiting stations. We must comply."

"The Queen? And who is that?"

"The individual history of the Queen is irrelevant, but in this case you might be interested. Her designation used to be 187 of 230, and before that, Lieutenant Carla Franson of the Federation starship Banshee." Jad could only stand speechless as he felt the transporter grab his molecules, sending them to the other side of Cube #347.

* * * * *

The chromaton propagation and containment systems were repaired and had successfully passed tests. After the assimilation of planet #1 and its orbital stations, the question of spare parts had been moot. Lunar settlements, asteroid colonies, and scientific outposts still resisted, but the complete securement of the system was forecast to be complete within three months. No longer directly needed for conquest, Cube #347 had been allowed to quietly orbit planet #1. It seemed the Greater Consciousness was as wary in its infancy of assimilation imperfection as its mature counterpart eight millennium later.

While the archives of Cube #347 were theoretically open to the Collective to gain a technological jump-start down the road of perfection, Consensus had decided to deny Itself the information. In fact, out of fear of altering the future timeline (which would eventually swing in a gigantic closed circle to create the Borg again), records of the circumstances surrounding the assimilation of species #1 were deliberately vague. Only technology and data available to species #1 at the time of assimilation would be adapted for use when the Collective began to spread into the galaxy.

Captain watched the viewscreen. The shipyards, once known as Farlula Industrial Port, were being rapidly converted to build cubes. The skeleton of the first one, extremely crude by later standards, took shape before the drone's watching eyes. Small, less than an eighth the volume of Cube #347, it nonetheless would do its designed job as well as any contemporary Battle-class cube - with efficiency and exacting deadlines.

As the new cube was a shadow of potential, so were the drones of the new Collective. Concentrating, Captain could feel the mentalities at the other end of the subspace link, could feel how incomplete they were in comparison to his own crew...although in an important way, much more finished than any of the sub-collective of Cube #347 could be. Sure, the drones of species #1 did not have the extreme hardware modifications which would develop over the next several thousand years, but they were already fundamentally Borg.

<< Leave now. You will return to the timeline you belong. The reason for Cube #347's presence is complete and contamination of the tau vector highly probable if the associated sub-collective remains. >>

Captain acknowledged the dismissal then spun out the proper command codes. Dropping into high transwarp, Cube #347's month long trek back to a particular system rich in bolonite ore began.

* * * * *

"We are back in our native timeline."

Captain had emerged from the bowels of the cube to inform Vorezze and his crew of the imminent temporal translocation. Jad was in the midst of laundry day, wrapped in a blanket while he waited for his uniform to slowly dry in the heated sauna of the cargo bay. Several of the crew had already tried to grab the sheet and run, but had been unsuccessful against their Betazoid captain.

Jad furrowed his brow, "What?"

"We are back in our native timeline," repeated Captain.

"I thought one had to go screaming around a star at high warp in order to be thrown through time."

A snort of amusement echoed in Jad's brain; the drone's face remained impassive.

"Around a star? That is an extremely primitive method, not to mention stressful on hardware and organics alike. When properly executed, time travel is no more difficult than opening a rip into another reality."

"Um, that's nice, I think." Jad reached out to feel a pant leg, but it was not sufficiently dry. If he put the trousers on now, it would be very uncomfortable; on the other hand, a knot of crew, headed by Dr. Lang, were fixing him with appraising pseudo-secretive glances. "How long till we are returned to the Alpha quadrant? And for that matter, are we going to be sent back to the Federation, assuming it can be done?" Jad changed the subject to one that had been gnawing not only on his consciousness, but was on the minds of nearly everyone in the cargo hold.

Captain's thoughts turned inwards. "We will be seeing to that matter momentarily. We have tasks which demand our attention." With that pronouncement, a transporter beam grabbed the drone. Before he completely dematerialized, a hand shot out to seize the concealing blanket, which subsequently disappeared in a display of green sparkles.

Stunned, Jad stood before the howls of delighted laughter.

Prank executed with perfection, Captain sent the blanket to the vast replicator recycling bins, where it would be broken down into its component parts. The entire idea had come from Commander Burns; and while the sub-collective was unsure as to the relevance of the bathroom humor, it was amusing to watch the interplay between members of the Banshee crew.

Bugs in a jar.

Cube #347 prepared to contact the Greater Consciousness. Although the Banshee crew had been told they would be returned home, the reality was there a dearth of computational power and data resources for the magnitude of the problem. Captain had the distinct feeling Vorezze, Burns, and the rest would shortly be joining the Collective. At least that would end the questions about a timetable on removal of the neural transceivers.

Captain sent the protocol requesting assistance while at the same time relaying a synopsis of the experiences gained by the sub-collective in the subjective past two and a half months. The attention of the Greater Consciousness turned upon its outcast part, focusing with the power of tens of trillions of living minds working as One, not to mention the countless echoes of those long terminated in the physical universe.

One echo in particular became unusually dominant. Deep within the original matrixes and computational lattices of planet #1, a sleeping program stirred. Ancient compulsions of a Queen dead for many a millennium temporarily took control of the vast network. Although she had only served as the hive's focus for three hundred forty-seven years (cyborg technology had not been advanced sufficiently to halt the otherwise inevitable decay of organic brain tissue nor

implants able to usurp normal neural functions), 187 of 230 had left a substantial imprint to guide the future Collective. One of her many legacies initiated.

The Collective became bound to not only allow the stranded Federation crew continue to be unassimilated, but to devise a method to send them back to the Banshee. Evidently a piece of Carla Franson had survived whole enough to repay a curious debt of gratitude. And thence it was known the first Queen had a touch of assimilation imperfection; all the more reason to keep future failures away from the Greater Consciousness.

Captain pulled away as the Collective returned to its busy schedule of research, manufacturing, assimilation, exploration, war, and so on. Cube #347 now had their answer and the method to send the Banshee crew home. Of course, if the Starfleet personnel could not be returned, they would have to be assimilated; the pragmatic first Queen had not included a year-long trip to the Federation just for the irrelevant sake of gratitude.

{Banshee crew,} called Captain into the general communication partition set for the unassimilated, {an attempt will be made to return you to the Alpha quadrant. What follows is a list of tasks that must be performed by you.} Captain paused as the list was relayed, then continued on, confusion evident, but unable to resist the compulsion set. The last input from the Greater Consciousness had included a peculiar addendum. {And Lieutenant Commander David Riley, there is a message for you from one Carla Franson. She would like you to know that not only did she really hate being on night-shift and feels the opportunities of the universe only opened when she became One with the Borg, but that you are the most incompetent chief engineer she ever had the misfortune to toil under.}

* * * * *

Captain Velorn, the Vulcan Section Thirty-One "experience" officer assigned to the Banshee, sat in the ready room chair. Although he could not admit it to anyone, not even himself, he was pleased to be in command of a starship again, even the Banshee with its less than perfect record and crew. Being called "Captain" once more was very, very satisfying.

Of course, it had only been two days since 175 of the crew, plus several animals and a plant, had spontaneously disappeared, replaced with piles of rubble identified as belonging to a bolonite ore asteroid. Tentative analysis of the quantum signature pointed to an origination in the Delta quadrant, which was even more puzzling. The mysterious accident had left the Banshee missing a good portion of her engineering staff, including nearly all of the night-shift, as well as many of the senior officers.

Admirals of Section Thirty-One were still debating on what action, if any, to take. Until a decision came in, Banshee had been ordered to remain in the target range system where events had occurred, taking continuous readings of subspace to determine if natural phenomena was to blame. Wanting to keep a tidy ship, Velorn had ordered the rubble to be swept up and placed in a cargo bay. Nearly twelve tons of useless rock now took up space next to important ship components.

"Bridge to Captain!" came over the communication systems. The voice was of Lieutenant Commander Vince DiSanto. As one of the most senior remaining bridge officers, he had been temporarily promoted to acting second-in-command. Protocol said Commander Tagel Axik should have that position, but she was completely distraught over the loss of Vorezze, and refused to come out of her room. Velorn was seriously contemplating sending the counselor to Axik's quarters, if only to frighten the Commander to emerge. DiSanto's voice continued, "Could

you come to the bridge, sir? We are picking up some anomalous readings."

"On my way." Yes, the title "Captain" was very nice indeed.

"Report," said Velorn as he sat in the command chair. He glared at Lieutenant Carn, who was tapping his foot to an unheard melody. The android abruptly stopped.

DiSanto: "It started a couple of minutes ago. The sensors have detected an odd subspace fluctuation in the vicinity. It almost seems intelligent in origin, except there are no ships in the area except for us."

"Can it be translated, or otherwise rendered intelligible?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then do so. Ensign Yakima, on screen please."

The ensign in question pushed a few buttons on her console. Nothing appeared on the screen except for static. However, words could be distantly heard beneath the crackling.

"Clean it up, Ensign." Yakima obliged, and understandable speech came through. It was the voice of Captain Vorezze.

"...will repeat. This is Federation Captain Jad Vorezze. Banshee, or any other vessel in the area, if you can hear me, please listen carefully and follow these instructions to the letter. You must take the bolonite asteroid rock that arrived on the Federation starship Banshee and subject it to intense bombardment with the BIC protocol. And this must be done /inside/ the ship. If the Banshee has left the area, please find her; and if the Banshee is hearing this message, /please/ do not have dumped that rock. If these instructions are not carried out perfectly, what's left of us are going to not only be stranded in the Delta quadrant, but will be assimilated by the Borg as well. This message will repeat. This is...."

"It repeats, sir," said Yakima.

Velorn sighed...and he had been having such a wonderful time being captain again.

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In anticipation of rescue, the Banshee crew was having their neural transceivers removed. The process was, if anything, more painful than the installation, at least the winces and whimpers of those being held still by members of the drone maintenance proclaimed that fact. However, the smiles of relief when Borg hardware was removed were very sincere.

If rescue didn't occur...no one wanted to think about that possibility.

Jad had decided to be the last to have his implant removed; it felt like the captaincy thing to do. The gesture showed he cared more about his crew than about himself.

{The pain is not that great.}

"Get out of my mind," quietly muttered Jad to himself. As he had long since discovered, mental discipline or no, there was no way to block the incoming words from Captain. That particular drone was not physically present, but Jad knew exactly where in the cube he was located, and only because Captain was teasing him with a sensory perception which translated to fleeting glances of an intersection with viewscreen. {I thought the transceivers had been turned off.} Jad closed his eyes to block the double vision he was processing.

{Yours has not. All the rest have.}

{And what would you know of pain? It is not like you feel it.}

{We feel pain, it is just not relevant beyond an indication that the body has been damaged.}

Jad opened his eyes into a squint, then fully as it was proved Captain was not going to mess with his vision at the moment. Shortly the transceiver would be gone. Steeling himself against the pain to come, Vorezze forced himself to cross the commons to where the deinstallations on the rest of the crew was finishing.

Jad was being held firmly in a kneeling position by two drones, waiting for a third to remove the transceiver, when the pair suddenly let go. Green light filled the cargo bay; as it disappeared, it could be seen all the Borg had been beamed out. {The Banshee has appropriately responded. Sensors is picking up the supraspace signature of a blind lambda termini. It is calculated that we must begin the return procedure now.}

Stumbling to his feet Vorezze began to complain loudly, "But this piece of Borg junk isn't out of my neck yet!" The words were drowned out by the intercom with a Collective Voice pronouncement.

"Banshee crew. You are to be returned now. Prepare."

At the same time: {Vorezze. I might add that while I hope we should meet again, I seriously doubt you would enjoy the situation under which such an encounter would occur. Protocol engaging. This link is terminated.}

A flash of white illuminated the hold as the BIC protocol was unleashed on organics who had a short time before ingested small quantities of bolonite (the asteroids of said ore had been moved to another cargo hold). For the 130 remaining Banshee crew, two dogs, and a hamster, the immediate reality suddenly wavered out of existence. No one could know what the miniature Altarian palm felt, but ten years and four ships later, the plant spontaneously turned bright blue for two months.

* * * * *

"Ouch! Get off my hand!"

"Your butt's in my face! And I don't like the view!"

A dog barked, then whined as someone accidentally stepped on its tail.

"Ensign Zeric, your antennae is poking my ear!"

"Zeke? Where are you Zeke? Are you all right?"

"Ben, if that is your hand on my anatomy, you better hope the Borg take you back, 'cause that's the only place you're going to find a limb replacement."

A small green plant fell of the squirming pile of black uniforms, but the pot miraculously did not shatter. If anyone had been paying attention, one might have seen the small tendril which pushed the plant back upright from its prone position.

Jad finally pushed his way to the edge of the heap, discovering that once again, yes, they were in a cargo hold. However, this bay was a familiar one belonging on Banshee. Standing up in a knee deep pile of asteroid rubble, Vorezze dusted himself off.

The doors to the corridor whooshed open, a most comforting sound. Into the hold charged a group of low-ranking security armed with phaser rifles. A familiar Vulcan followed behind.

"Velorn!" yelled Jad. "We're back!" He glanced behind at the pile which was slowly sorting itself out, then reached to feel the back of his neck. His combadge had been left seventy thousand light years away, and using the implant was obviously out of the question. Thinking of which.... "Velorn, could you call Dr. Issac? I've this thing on my neck that I really, really want removed."

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After such a historic adventure, one which filled the information gaps present at the conception of the Borg Collective, the emptiness and boredom associated with tracking species #8511 was a definite let-down. A party was not expected - this wasn't the Federation, after all - but a return to sniffing a trail gone cold was not fulfilling either. Once again, the Greater Consciousness left the exiled to make their lonely way.

The disappearing subspace wake definitely led towards the nebula, a vast stretch of gas and dust tinged red and purple near stellar nurseries. Boredom. Boredom. Boredom. Captain absently altered the course in the conduit a few tenths of a degree, responding to adverse sensory input processed from Sensors and her hierarchy.

Boredom. Boredom. Boredom. Then...

{Something chewed through the optic cabling in subsection 2, submatrix 26. Do you hear me, Doctor? Something /chewed/ through the cable. And it /chewed/ through duralloy metal to gain the chance to /chew/ the fiber in the first place.} Delta's double voice roared in the intranet.

Distantly, the screaming squawk of an avian echoed over the walkways.

'Perhaps boredom is preferable to the alternative,' thought Captain.